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The Portrait of a Wo/Man

Edith Wharton

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in the department of English

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The Portrait of a Wo/Man

Nancy C. Boemo

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First Reader James R. Lindroth Thesis Approval
Second Reader David M. Rogers

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With much love to my pride and joys:

**Michael John Boemo
and
Michael Austin Boemo**

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Introduction

Edith Wharton was born on January 24, 1862, and died on August 11, 1937.

She was a prolific writer. During her lifetime, Edith Wharton published thirteen novels, nine novellas, a collection of short stories, a collection of ghost stories, three volumes of poetry, and eight major works of nonfiction.

Criticism of Wharton's art abounds. Each critic longs to live inside the mind of the author. However, Wharton's mind was never fixed. She oscillated between the masculine and the feminine points of view. Frustrated critics cannot pin-point Wharton's heart, mind and psyche. Her work is not definitive. As such it is difficult to reflect on her proper place in American literature. It is believed by some critics that Wharton took a self-deprecating tone in her letters of correspondence and in her autobiography. But like Wharton's character Mrs. Fetherel in the short story "Expiation," one cannot take, nor should take neither Wharton or Mrs. Fetherel's quill pen feather-lightly.

Wharton has been called an essentialist, an historian of an American social epoch, a modernist, a misandrist, a misogynist, a realist, and a socialist. But she does not easily fit into these water-tight compartments. Wharton was outside of these categories. Therefore, she is outside of definitive scholarly appraisal or interpretation of her work. Indeed, Wharton is legendary because she does not easily fit into any one of these categories. She is insulated from compartmentalization because she was writing at an intersection, not paused, but oscillating between two genders, masculine and feminine. Her mind was androgynous.

As a female, Wharton does not fit into the great literary tradition of the dominant masculine culture. Nor does Wharton fit perfectly into a feminine dialect. Rather, she incorporates two dialectical gender viewpoints in her writing, masculine and feminine. Wharton demonstrates this duality of masculine and feminine viewpoints in her art and her personal life.

The Portrait of a Wo/Man

"As my work reaches its close, I feel so sure that it is either nothing, or far more than they know. And I wonder a little desolately which?" (Lewis 465)

Edith Wharton draws critics like flies to a picnic. All the buzz is about her art. If only the written word were as transparent as the wings of a fly, literature wouldn't be such a fly-catcher. But literature is *never* mere verbiage, it's *always* art. As an art form, its medium is the word. Because it is written, it's problematic. Therefore, the written word cannot be blindly trusted. It cannot simply be taken for granted. Nor can it be readily ascertained what the author intended. Nevertheless, a swarm of high-flying eminent critics and scholars, through biography and criticism--guesswork or gossipy hack work--are buzzing about the words of Edith Wharton in her full-wrought art. Each chronicler and critic claims to seek and find in her written words the real heart, mind and character of Edith Wharton. A Feast of Words is the outcome (Apologies to Cynthia Griffin Wolff). This fly-feeding frenzy is nothing more than a paper trail that inevitably ends where it began. Try as they might to carve out a passage, so to speak, their trail turns into a rut. Critics cannot hew a clear path to Edith Wharton's psyche. They're just flies in the ointment of literature.

"a good mind is androgynous"

--Coleridge--(Woolf 98)

Edith Wharton is an enigma insoluble. Like Shakespeare, she cannot be definitive. Like Shakespeare, Wharton possessed and demonstrated in her art and her life a bisexuality of vision, that is, the fusion of the masculine and feminine. Wharton possessed that "unity of the mind," that fully developed mind that Virginia Woolf went into such a brilliant rant about in *A Room of One's Own* (97). Wharton is that woman writer Woolf sought in that happy age, Shakespeare's age, when the writer used both sides of the brain equally. Genius, like Shakespeare! Perhaps Wharton is Shakespeare's sister, who knew back in the sixteenth century that the time was out of joint for a woman to write, but preserved her genius until the time was ripe to blaze forth and prove her presence. Herein, Wharton is suspect and subject of genius.

Wharton appears to have housed the same state of mind as Shakespeare. That is, Shakespeare was a human endowment of male and female cohabitants. So, too, Wharton was a human endowment of female and male cohabitants. Wharton's mind was not single-sexed; it was neither exclusively masculine nor exclusively feminine. A one-dimensional mind is narrowly focused. As female, Wharton did not have a narrow vision; she did not see strictly from a feminist lens. She had a wider vision. Wharton saw from masculine binoculars as well. S/he saw from both points of view, the masculine and the feminine. It is through this wider vision or far-seeing lens, that Wharton demonstrates an art form that, in a compelling way, speaks to and about men

and women and how they relate to each other. Moreover, Wharton's art demonstrates how a single-sex-vision limits itself to a world of diminished possibilities. Certainly, for the writer, it is a purgatory of the imagination. Literature would suffer. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff makes the point in her study of Wharton, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*, "It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly" (Wolff 104). More to this point is Mary Gordon paraphrasing Virginia Woolf: "unless men and women can be androgynous in mind, literature itself will be permanently flawed" (Woolf xii). Therefore, if readers can agree that Shakespeare's mind was man-womanly, Wharton's mind was womanly-man. Thus, Wharton was a wo/man. As such, in a delicate interplay, her mind ebbs and flows to one or the other side of her brain to make the point for or against the opposite sex. Like Shakespeare, Wharton's mind was, in a word, androgynous!

If literature has a heart and mind, it is the mind that ruled the heart of Wharton's fiction. Think of literature as a big railway station. Think of Wharton's mind as a train of thought on railroad tracks that intersect the male and the female points of view. At times, s/he takes this train of thought--crosses over to the other side--railing against the one sex to dramatize the condition of the other. It is as if Wharton, in answering a call, bought a ticket on the train where "Aline Gorren, in the *Critic*, called for female writers to write of women with authority and looked to Mrs. Wharton 'primarily for the genius with which she will bring to the surface the underground movements of women's minds. . .'" (Tuttleton, Lauer, Murray xii). But the ticket was not one-way. It was a round-trip, back and forth, to and fro along feminine and masculine tracks.

One might argue that since Edith Wharton was born on January 24, 1862, she is the two-faced Janus who speaks from both of its mouths. In so doing, Wharton speaks for the female and the male. Wharton's words have the swing of Shakespeare's words. It is this oscillation between the masculine and the feminine points of view at work in Wharton's fiction.

Read this way, this subtle but complex co-mingling of the masculine and feminine in Wharton's fiction is projected from some deep center in herself. This deep center was not found halfway down her spine in that so-called seat of the soul. Rather, this deep center was formed in the "circle of Willis" in her brain. According to Stedman's Medical Dictionary the "circle of Willis," or the *Circulus Arteriosus Cerebri*, is defined as:

an anastigmatic 'circle' of arteries at the base of the brain
formed sequentially and in anterior to posterior direction
by the anterior communicating artery, the two anterior cerebral,
the two internal carotid, the two posterior communicating,
and the two posterior cerebral arteries. . . . (310)

In lay terms, this process may be thought of as an intersection directing and distributing blood flow to and from the brain. In writing terms, one can think of Wharton's "circle of Willis" as a meeting of the mind(s), so to speak, masculine and feminine. It was a juncture of articulation for Wharton, a marriage between the male and the female mindset. It may be seen as either a union of two minds and two spirits, or the ebb and flow of deep communion between the two. Thus, the "circle of Willis" is the center of Wharton's mind, the center of her intelligence, and central in the process of her fiction,

as well as in the particulars of her personal life. Perhaps the mastery and the mystery of the enigmatic Wharton is also centered here.

Physiologically speaking, though everyone has a "circle of Willis" at the base of the brain, artistically speaking, not everyone is able to reach into the depths of their minds to discover and embrace two gender selves within--male and female. Doubtless this has occurred before and since Shakespeare. But, alas, Wharton recognized that she too had this human endowment of two: masculine and feminine co-operating, co-existing, side by side. Whether Wharton was consciously or unconsciously aware of her innate gift is uncertain. What is certain is that she possessed the literary powers of both sexes. It is her hallmark and subject of her genius.

Sexual inquisitiveness drives some prying Whartonian critics. These are literary voyeurs, skulking around personal and sexual matters as if they were hiding or peering out from behind one of Edith Wharton's long, tight skirts, hoping to get a closer glimpse of the "inside story." Inasmuch as their criticism clings and binds, they are merely threads of the fabric that color and make up Edith Wharton. These critics can weave into the texture of her prose, some even get tangled up in it, but no critic in particular can claim the color of the fabric itself. They are merely threads that bind, but fail to hem in, or tie down, her complexities of "meaning." Whether critics cling to Wharton's feminine viewpoints or masculine viewpoints, collectively they are all only loose threads, single viewpoints that collapse the whole. Wharton's viewpoint was never fixed. Therefore, the accurate view of Wharton is one of awe.

Then, there are those critics and theorists who value and apply theoretical methodology over the literature itself--whose theory is shaped too exclusively by their own cultural politics. Even so, it is popular to put forth these hard and fast contemporary theories of lofty criticism. Though meant to be useful to others, seem more than anything else like literary grandstanding. Though many criticisms are incisive and intelligent, ultimately they turn into a personal statement that tends to read the critic more than the critic reads the work. Inevitably, the theory becomes an expression of passion, or a culmination of a life's work in reading, writing about, and teaching literature. Here fellowships are funded and lectureships endowed. Thus, criticism is a debatable enterprise.

This undertaking will not read into a methodological theory. As one critic, (Cynthia Griffin Wolff) opined, Wharton "did not want the standard academic exercise; she wanted something for which there was no map or pattern--an expedition into the uncharted zones of feminine genius and creativity" (Wolff xiii). But it is Wharton herself, who made her view clear regarding 'theory' in a letter to Bernard Berenson regarding Joyce's Ulysses and T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land. "The trouble with all this new stuff is that . . . the theory comes first, & dominates it" (*Letters* 461).

Theory methodology is governed by laws of thought---not free-thinking. Moreover, theory methodology remains not only a disputable enterprise, but disreputable as well. It is consistently inconsistent. It is as right as it is wrong. Only Edith Wharton has dominion over her work. The only dominating "Voice" of authority is Edith Wharton's. As creator/narrator, she is the only one empowered to explain the meaning of

her art, and Wharton has said all she has to say, in her own words. She has bequeathed her readers and reviewers an art form in the form of fiction. Biographers and critics give shape to her form, but not the form itself. They cannot re-create the artist. She is dead. Her work survives.

Literary survival was very important to Edith Wharton. She was a very cooperative subject, in that she left an ample amount of information regarding her life and her art. However, she saved and destroyed selectively.

Wharton wrote her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, and published it in 1934, three years before her death. From a personal dimension, Wharton wrote her own memoirs "to avoid having it inaccurately done," she protested, "by someone else after my death, should it turn out that my books survive me long enough to make it worth while to write my biography" (Lewis 458-59). Wharton's words here are in agreement with her biographer R. W. B. Lewis, (and her "best critic," according to Harold Bloom).

According to Lewis, in the Introduction to his book, *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, Wharton "took pains to see that the biographer would have at his disposal as complete a record as possible" (Lewis xi). However, Lewis, on the very next page, contradicts himself. He said: "Wharton seemed to take her art more casually than she should have" (Lewis xii). Casual? In what sense did he mean this? Maybe Lewis is too casual in his underestimation of the power of and within writing itself.

Wharton was not one to take anything casually, least of all her art. This was a woman who took control of her art and her life. This was a woman who, when her dear friend Walter Berry died in 1927, "flew into a panic" (Lewis 501). Wharton rushed over

to Berry's apartment in Paris to retrieve and burn the letters she had written to him over thirty years. It is estimated some four-hundred or more letters were burned (*Letters* 5). In fact, as Lewis put it, "She made a ritual burning of the lot" (Lewis 478). This is a case of how life imitates art, or how art imitates life. Wharton's letters are in her own voice. She did not want to be public property. Maybe this is why "Henry James burned all but a handful of the many letters (170?) Edith Wharton wrote him between 1902 and 1915. But Edith Wharton was the one to destroy her letters to Walter Berry, the American lawyer who was her advisor and companion for thirty years" (Lewis & Lewis 5).

To the astute reader, several Whartonian things come to mind. The first thing that immediately comes to mind through this burning of the letters itself, is Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, wherein Lily Bart throws a batch of love letters written by Bertha Dorset to Selden Lawrence into Selden's fireplace, rather than leave them open to public scandal and embarrassment. The letters represent the written word, exposed to scrutiny. Bertha Dorset is Lily Bart's female foil and dark double. However, Bertha represents the masculine side of the feminine Lily. That is, Bertha is masculine because she writes. Though there is no etymology of the name "Bertha" to connect to an evidentiary conclusion, it is not a stretch to assert that Wharton gives this character the name of Berth-a, to sound like, and perhaps mean, the birth of the female author/writer. Perhaps, then, Bertha is called and considered "dangerous" by Judy Trenor because she writes! Bertha has a "disregard of appearances" (Wharton 335). Therefore, when Wharton herself burns her letters to Berry, she too is recognizing writing as "dangerous." As a writer, Wharton knows the power of the written word. She knows how writing is open to

critical condemnation by the reading public. She knows that the written word cannot be trusted, but she also knows how it can be misconstrued, misinterpreted, misread, misunderstood. As such, this single action says a lot about the wo/man Edith Wharton, and a lot about the art of writing itself.

The opposite scenario takes place in another Wharton work, a novella, called *The Touchstone* (1900), wherein, as Katherine Joslin sums up this time:

the case of the writer Margaret Aubyn, whose love letters are sold after her death by her lover Stephen Glennard, to glimpse Wharton's own horror at the thought of making herself 'public property,' a commodity for profit. What Glennard faces in the novella are 'the divinities who, below the surface of our deeds and passions, 'silently forge the fatal weapons of the dead.' He is haunted by the ghostlike presence of Margaret Aubyn--thinly veiling Wharton's own presence--who presses him to see the injustice of providing to the public a woman's personal letters, revealing her 'soul, absolutely torn up by the roots.' . . . (Joslin 135)

These two sides of Edith Wharton, or narrative modes, masculine and feminine, can also be detected in Wharton's *Letters*, which has led some onlookers (typically females) astray. For example, R.W.B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis have put together a compilation of Edith Wharton's letters fittingly called *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, (1988). Herein, they indicate how Janet Malcolm, writing in the New York Times about the Library of America volume of Edith Wharton's fiction, claims that Wharton "hated, feared, and distrusted women." To this assertion, Lewis and Lewis reply: "Such an idea could derive only from an ignorance of her character and personal life, and from a

doctrinaire misreading or simple nonreading of the work" (Lewis & Lewis 8). Further, according to the research materials recovered and compiled by Lewis and Lewis, Wharton's letters clearly indicate the "masculine" and "feminine" sides of Edith Wharton coexisting like the reflection of two souls in shifting rhythm. They especially refer to letters she wrote to Henry James about visits she made to the battlefronts in 1915, wherein she dialectically oscillates between the masculine and the feminine. In addition, Lewis and Lewis point to this alternation and mingling of the masculine and feminine in Wharton's letters to Walter "Berenson from North Africa in April 1914," wherein she "moves naturally from the evocation of an atmosphere like that of an 'unexpurgated page of the Arabian Nights' and the delineation of 'effeminacy, obesity, obscenity or black savageness' in the native populace to a moment of almost shattering drama: the sheer sexual terror Mrs. Wharton experienced when she awoke in the darkness of her Timgad hotel room to find a strange man bending over her" (Lewis & Lewis 8-9).

Moreover, there are traces aplenty of the masculine and feminine points of view in Edith Wharton's fiction. Two gender selves were certainly in mind when Wharton wrote her Pulitzer-prize-winning novel, *The Age of Innocence* (1920). For this novel, Wharton returned to her childhood New York for background, thus demonstrating Virginia Woolf's belief that "a writer's country is a territory within his own brain" (Goodman 120).

Wharton's *Age of Innocence* takes place in the early 1870s. This was a masculine New York, molded in patriarchal social ritual and tradition. Indeed, one of Wharton's

social observations of Old New York society was how it excluded women, especially, "those who wrote" (AI 100).

In this novel, Wharton is both Newland Archer, the male protagonist, and Countess Ellen Olenska, one of the female protagonists. As one critic, Judith Fryer observed, "Both Edith Wharton and Newland Archer are fifty-seven years old at the end of *The Age of Innocence*, and Archer, a free man at last, having traveled to Paris to stand beneath the windows of the woman he has loved in tormented secrecy for twenty-nine years. . ." (Fryer 102). Both Wharton and Archer have the love and respect of "one great man," Theodore Roosevelt. As her biographer Lewis points out, "Newland" brings her "closer to her own middle name, Newbold" (Lewis 431). But, *The Age of Innocence* is not totally Newland Archer's story. It is not just a man's story; it's also a woman's story. Even though Newland Archer is male, he finds himself sympathetic to the female, namely Ellen Olenska, and champions her cause. Thus, as a fe/male writer, Wharton uses her artistic power to control Newland Archer's male thinking and range of vision.

Archer wants and seeks change for society, in particular for its women. Wharton, therefore, gives Archer a privileged male perspective into the female condition. In so doing, one may suggest that Newland Archer's perpetual retreat to the library may be read as Wharton's suggestion that society needs to rewrite history as it pertains to the condition and treatment of women. Lest readers forget, it is in Newland's library where he angrily protests to Mr. Sillerton Jackson and, in so doing, declares a vote for women's rights: "Women ought to be free--as free as we are" (AI 26).

Speech is a prerequisite for emancipation. As a male, Archer has freedom of speech. Therefore, as a fe/male writer, Wharton exercises and makes through Archer's freedom of speech, a declaration for women's rights.

Edith Wharton is also the female protagonist, Countess Ellen Olenska. Ellen is depicted as living on the same street, West Twenty-third Street, as Wharton did as a child. Ellen has just returned to America from Paris, leaving an abusive husband behind. Ellen Olenska is the antithesis of her cousin May Welland, Newland Archer's young wife-to-be. May is Americanized, traditional and unimaginative. May, according to Newland, is a "young girl who knew nothing and expected everything." Once married, May Welland will become that kind of woman "that seals the mind against imagination and the heart against experience." Thus, Newland concludes: "There was no use in trying to emancipate a wife who had not the dimmest notion that she was not free" (AI 195-98).

In contrast to May Welland, Ellen Olenska is Europeanized, lively, and untraditional. As Susan Goodman points out, "Ellen represents all that is not domestic" (Goodman 108). New York frowns upon divorce, which Ellen seeks. Wharton, in her mind's eye, saw society frown on her own divorce from Teddy. As critic Judith Fryer makes the point, "Ellen offers the possibilities of individual freedom and experience, instinct and variety, cultural and sexual richness" (Fryer 109). Ellen like Wharton, is an artist who constructs her identity. Ellen wants her freedom. Newland mistakenly assumes that Ellen wants her freedom only to be free to marry another man. Ellen establishes female independence by leaving, and not needing, a husband. Wharton

established her freedom and independence by doing the same thing. Ellen continues to demonstrate this female power when she moves back to America, when she visits her cousin Regina Beaufort, and when she refuses to return to her husband, but returns to Paris to live "alone." Like Ellen, Wharton divorces her husband and returns to Paris to live a single life. (Wharton divorced Teddy, April 16, 1913).

It is interesting to point out that in *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton did not follow a "female" text by marrying, bearing children and living happily ever after. This reluctance on her part not to allow a happy ending is the center of controversy in her fiction. If Wharton wanted to make this a romantic story, she would have had Newland Archer reunite with Ellen Olenska at the end of the novel. She does not do so. Rather, at the end of the novel, Newland and Ellen do not renew their relationship. At the novel's conclusion, Newland Archer is a free man. Without marriage and motherhood, Ellen, like Wharton, is a free woman. Therefore, Wharton's dialectical alternation between the masculine and the feminine may be read as a social commentary on the institution of marriage itself. Wharton may be indicating that marriage may not be at the center of a healthy relationship for the man and the woman.

Using both male and female characters, Wharton demonstrates a bisexual vision that marriage may not be the center of unity for men or women. Like so many of Wharton's novels, *The Age of Innocence* has at its center society's view of women and the female condition. However, by placing the marriage between Newland Archer and May Welland at the center of the novel, the fulcrum, Wharton is centering on society itself and its view of marriage. In other words, by centering on the institution of

marriage, Wharton obviously sees it as imprisonment, entrapment, wed-lock for both men and women. Indeed, if marriage is the only view for women in this Old New York patriarchal society, society cannot grow beyond its own and adapt to change. As one critic, Janet Goodwyn suggested as Wharton's view, "It is the disenfranchisement of women by marriage that retards the development of a real civilisation" (Goodwyn 28).

The mind is its own place, and in itself
 Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.
 --John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book I, Lines 254-55--

Critics have *almost* recognized Edith Wharton in her entirety. In the multitudinous articles and books written for and about Edith Wharton, "Teddy" Wharton must be a lost chapter. Perhaps there's a page ripped out somewhere. The naked truth is that critics barely recognize "Teddy" in their research. When they do, the slender bulk of their recognition does not give him honorable mention. Rather, with their interrogatory ink, he is made to appear as flat a character as the page he's condemned on. They blur his simple tastes and focus intensively on how difficult he made Wharton's life. When critics salt him in here and there, it is in pestilent paragraphs of acid commentary, or just enough to season him in bad taste. All told, Teddy is mentioned only in terms of his marriage to, separation and divorce from---Edith Wharton. Shockingly, in many of the books, he's not even listed by name in the Index. Rather, he falls into a category, or a subtitle, under Edith Wharton, marriage of, and the subsequent page(s) listed.

This is strange, given the fact that "Teddy" was for thirty years a part, more or less, of Wharton's life! From all critical accounts it was only during the last ten years of their marriage that Wharton found "Teddy" unbearable. Yet critics are very critical of Teddy. It seems, more than anything else, that when Teddy said "I do," the critics exercised to the fullest their capacity to give the devil "Teddy" his due! Yet his scant representation in Wharton biographies and criticism speaks volumes.

It is difficult to build even a skeletal profile of Teddy from the bare bones of information provided by biographers. For the sake of argument, one may read "Teddy" in two different ways. First, he was a good guy, in which case he was a Teddy bear. Second, he was a bad guy, which would simply make Teddy a bear to live with. Critics gave up the former in order to portray the latter. Blame for "Edith's agony of spirit" had to be pinned on someone (Lewis 481). Why not blame Teddy? In actuality, what Teddy could not bare is a life without Edith. His existence without her was only a partial one. Long after their divorce "Teddy was heard to say occasionally, with pathetic incomprehension about the divorce, 'Puss shouldn't have done that to me'" (Lewis 481).

Wharton's biographer, R. W. B. Lewis, gives a closer portrait of Teddy's character and less of a character assassination. The following, quoted here in its entirety, makes the point:

Teddy had no money of his own, but his parents gave him an allowance of two thousand dollars a year, and under the circumstances his needs were few. He had no vocation, nor any intention of seeking one. He was popular and gregarious, and something of a gourmet and connoisseur of good wines; he was as welcome as a handsome, well-born bachelor might be expected to be at Boston social gatherings; He made the customary gesture of helping out in several of the city's charitable institutions. . . . (Lewis 51)

The attentive reader and critic notices that Lewis' critique of Teddy is a balance of good and not-so-good attributes. In a word, Teddy was imperfect. But the rhetorical

question must be, was Edith Wharton perfect? The point is, was this wo/man looking for perfection in a man? More to the point, why did this wo/man marry?

Edith Newbold Jones met and married Edward Robbins Wharton--("Teddy" to his friends)--on the rebound. Edith was "still quivering with pain and bewilderment" from the "bruising termination of her engagement" to Harry Stevens, "a popular member of New York society," writes R.W.B. Lewis, when she met and married "Teddy," who was thirteen years her senior (Lewis 51, 52). Apparently, "Teddy" came after her brief encounter with yet another suitor, Walter Berry.

Walter Van Rensselaer Berry was three years older than Edith, a classy guy, an 1881 Harvard graduate, with an "Honorable Mention" in French. When it came to intellect, "Berry had a cultivated and discriminating literary mind." When it came to travel, Berry had happy feet, "and set off on an eighteen-month tour of Europe." However, when it came to marriage, Berry got cold feet and "took his leave, and it was fourteen years (later) before the friendship would be renewed (Lewis 48, 49). According to her biographer, Lewis, "after Berry made his courteous departure, the humiliation was a hidden one," but total for Edith Wharton (Lewis 50).

Along came another suitor, "Teddy" Wharton, who was mother-bound and married Edith on the rebound. Teddy Wharton entered into an unsuitable marriage with Edith Jones for all the wrong reasons. Reminiscent of her tragic heroine Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, (1905), who fears becoming an old maid at twenty-nine, Edith Jones at the tender age of twenty-three felt also "dangerously close to the age beyond which the young women of her set became steadily less marriageable" (Lewis 52). On the other

hand, Teddy at thirty-six years old, was comfortable with bachelorhood "for too many years to invite any sudden and radical change in his life" (Lewis 51). Nevertheless, fatal attraction was there and genuine if only in their mutual fondness of the out-of-doors and affection for animals: Teddy horses, Edith dogs.

Perhaps more than anything else, this mutual fondness for similar likes may have affected their decision to enter into a marriage. They were not to be the perfect union of lovers. There was no passion between them. Therefore, for better or worse, the latter coming quickly because Teddy could not penetrate into the most hidden recesses of Edith's mind or body. As Wharton's biographer, Lewis, said of their marriage: "There is no question that the sexual side of their marriage was a disaster" (Lewis 53). There was no intimacy in their marriage at all. In fact their marriage was completely celibate. Teddy simply accepted it, "however it may have perplexed him" (Lewis 55).

The Wharton marriage was at first one of companionship. As time went on, however, one observer claims that "Teddy appeared. . . as a kind of cipher in Edith's life, as more of an equerry than an equal, walking behind her and carrying whatever paraphernalia she happened to discard" (Auchincloss 88). As Auchincloss also pointed out, Teddy was always following in his wife's wake, willing "to let his wife take the lead," and "always keeping a thousand-dollar bill in his wallet in case Pussy wanted something" (Auchincloss 48-49). Henry James referred to them as "the Edith Whartons" (Lewis 130).

No one doubts that tension was building over the years and over Edith Wharton's fame. However, the marriage between Wharton and Teddy was wrong. Perhaps Edith

Wharton should never have married at all. "She and Teddy were deeply, fundamentally incompatible, and their superficial congeniality could not survive the glaring intimacy of marriage. . ." (Auchincloss 49).

At the time of their marriage, Teddy had eyes for Edith. Wharton had her eye on her literary ambition. Teddy hurt and confused, eventually went insane. Edith's pen was her handle on sanity. It was with her writing that she had a life-long affair. As far as Edith and Teddy are concerned, there is no intercourse--verbal or physical--between them. It had nothing to do with the body, that is, Wharton's attitude about intimacy with a man. She was not a lesbian. It had to do with her mind. Though Teddy was gentle in nature, he was not powerful in the mind. Their minds didn't connect. Wharton had an eclectic appetite that Teddy could not nourish. There was nothing wrong with Teddy. Teddy was simply wrong-headed for the high-minded Edith Wharton. As biographer Louis Auchincloss remarked in his book, *Edith Wharton: A Woman in Her Time* (1971): "Not all Elizabeth Barretts find Robert Brownings" (48).

On February 12, 1908, Edith Wharton entered into an adulterous affair with W. Morton Fullerton, a Paris-based journalist for the London Times. Morton Fullerton proved his erudition early. When Fullerton was an undergraduate at Harvard, he won the esteemed Bowdoin Prize for literature in his junior year and graduated magna cum laude in 1886 (Lewis 184).

Fullerton was a bisexual with a gaudy sexual history. Gloria Erlich asserts that "Fullerton liberated the sexuality of some remarkably discerning men and women" (Erlich 87). Fullerton maintained several mistresses. In addition, he had several

well-known homosexual relationships. One in particular was with a good friend of Oscar Wilde, a talented sculptor Ronald Sutherland, Lord Gower (Lewis 185). Moreover, Fullerton was one of the most promising of Henry James's younger friends and admirers. Henry James, it is well-established, was homosexual. James often expressed the "tenderness" he felt for Fullerton, showering him with love letters that began with the salutation: "Dear Boy" (Lewis 183). James was also a vicarious participant in Wharton's affair with Fullerton, in a kind of *ménage à trois*: "tell him [Morton] with my love that I am as much in his skin as he is himself; & that my idea of a proper affection for my friends is to be to that degree in their skins" (Goodman 60-3).

Henry James was the match-maker between Morton Fullerton and Edith Wharton. In a letter to Fullerton, James encouraged him, "to let Mrs. Wharton know of your American presence and whereabouts, that she may ask you to come to her. . . ." (Lewis 183). When Fullerton went to visit Wharton at her colossal mansion in Lenox, Massachusetts, "The Mount," their minds met, and connected. Wharton could not help but immediately notice Fullerton's intelligence. "They talked together at length about his still unfinished essay on Henry James" (Lewis 198). Wharton was so taken with Fullerton that she began to keep a private daily journal addressed to him, where she "openly . . . might speak to him within the pages" (Lewis 208). She was "exhilarated by the movement of Fullerton's mind." Fullerton's mind had the "characteristic swings from the intellectual to the erotic (Lewis 205). Wharton and Fullerton fell in love with their mental communion.

The attentive reader and critic need only look at two pictures one of William Morton Fullerton, circa 1908, and one of Teddy Wharton, circa 1898, to see the startling physical resemblance between these two men. The photographs are, strangely enough, directly "centered" in Gloria C. Erlich's book called *The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton*, (1992). This reader has seen the two aforementioned photographs during research for this paper and makes the argument that "the mind"---is head and shoulders above physical traits! Thus, Wharton demonstrates, in having an affair with Fullerton---that one falls in love first with the mind! For Wharton, physical union came second.

In her book, *Edith Wharton*, Katherine Joslin makes the point that Wharton showed early signs of depression and apathy during her marriage to Teddy. They did not share a bedroom. Rather, Teddy's bedroom was down the hall from Edith's, at the other end of her world. "Apparently, sleeping in the same room [bed] with her husband made breathing difficult for her" (Joslin 10).

It may have been the issue of marriage itself that made Edith Wharton weary. Her restlessness and "avidity for motion and travel" suggest that she wanted to be, needed to be---free. Whether it is the entrapment that Wharton felt being married, or the imprisonment she felt in knowing that Teddy was not like-minded, is uncertain. What is certain is that there was no connection between Edith Wharton and Teddy in body or mind. It is chiefly through books that Wharton enjoyed intercourse with superior minds.

Edith and Teddy divorced in 1913, but she must have suffered some pangs of guilt. As Louis Auchincloss suggested, "The year that brought Edith her psychological

freedom . . . also saw the publication of *The Custom of the Country*" (101). In this novel, the female protagonist, Undine Spragg, not once but twice ruthlessly divorces blameless husbands for personal advantage. Tellingly, Undine is "insensitive, and devoid of passion or maternal instinct" (Auchincloss 102). Another obvious characteristic of Undine, like her creator "Wharton," is her failure to be more explicit about her sexuality. Like Wharton, s/he is a sexless female. Even though Undine Spragg changes husbands she does not change her mind about sex with them. There is no sex, per se, in the novel. Undine Spragg in the novel is Edith Wharton in her marriage to Teddy. Hence, *The Custom of the Country* is Wharton's me-novel.

The masculine and feminine sides of Edith Wharton were readily apparent during the time of her unhappy marriage. Characteristically male, Wharton was the designer and architect of her gigantic house "The Mount," which she built from the ground up, lying in the foothills of the Berkshires in Lenox Massachusetts. Characteristically female, Wharton created a magnificent garden at "The Mount," that was second to none. "There were literally hundreds of varieties of flowers and plants in the profusion of carefully laid out beds" (Lewis 136).

"You have to go plumb down to the Mothers to fish up the real thing."

Vance Weston in *The Gods Arrive*

Many feminist theorists are quick to point the finger of blame for Edith Wharton's emotional life on her mother, "Mommie Dearest," Lucretia Jones, for nurturing in Edith what D. W. Winnicott has called a "false self." In Cynthia Griffin Wolff's *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*, Wharton is quoted:

Once when I was seven or eight, an older cousin had told me that babies were not found in flowers but in people. This information had been given unsought, but as I had been told by Mamma that it was "not nice" to enquire into such matters, I had a vague sense of contamination, and went immediately to confess my involuntary offense. I received a severe scolding, and was left with a penetrating sense of "not-niceness" which effectual kept me from pursuing my investigations farther; and that was literally all I knew of the processes of generation till I had been married for several weeks. . . . (Wolff 39)

Some fifteen years later, a few days prior to her marriage, the subject of intimacy and the mystery of babies would come up again. Here again, Wharton recalls:

I was seized with such a dread of the whole dark mystery that I summoned up courage to appeal to my mother, and begged her, with a heart beating to suffocation, to tell me 'what being married was like.' Her handsome face at once took on the look of icy disapproval which I most dreaded. 'I never heard such a ridiculous question!' she said impatiently; and I felt at once how vulgar she thought me. But in the extremity of my need I persisted.

"I'm afraid, Mamma-I want to know what will happen to me!"

The coldness of her expression deepened to disgust. She was silent for a dreadful moment; then she said with an effort:

'You've seen enough pictures and statues in your life.

Haven't you noticed that men are--made differently from women?"

'Yes,' I faltered blankly. 'Well, then---?' I was silent, from sheer inability to follow, and she brought out sharply: 'Then for heaven's sake don't ask me any more silly questions.

You can't be as stupid as you pretend!' (Wolff 40)

At the risk of sounding totally insensitive, it is difficult to buy into the viewpoint held by some critics (again, predominately women) that Edith Wharton was improperly prepared for marriage because of her mother. Cynthia Griffin Wolff feels that "the first lesson Edith Wharton learned about becoming a woman was that society made no provisions for her feelings; and her unhealthy subservience to the letter of Lucretia's law (though not, ironically, to the model of Lucretia's behavior) was for years to cripple her as a woman and as an artist" (Wolff 40).

If one accepts Wolff's view of the woman/artist Wharton as a "cripple," one would diminish the substantiation of Wharton's worldview put forth herein. She is the subject and suspect of genius. What emerges in calling Wharton a "cripple" is a marginal woman and writer. Wharton could never have evolved into that extraordinary woman Virginia Woolf hoped to find; she would not have been able to express her genius, if her unhappiness interfered with her creation. Thus, Cynthia Griffin Wolff does not have Wharton in control of her faculties and her art, but instead envisions her writing in

chaos--rage. This view would have Wharton's work deformed and twisted. Best to remember the view put forth by Virginia Woolf, who said of women writing in a rage "she will never get her genius expressed whole and entire" (Woolf 69). Therefore, to endorse Cynthia Griffin Wolff's view, would make Wharton's brain an atrophied organ, the very organ Wharton gives dimension and substantiation. Furthermore, it is interesting to note here what another critic Katherine Joslin, said about Wolff's work on Wharton. Joslin pointed out that "Wharton becomes a heroine in Wolff's work." As such, Joslin makes the additional point that "Wolff's work suggests that Edith Wharton might fare better as a writer in the hands of female critics" (Joslin 136). Perhaps it would have been better for Cynthia Griffin Wolff to say, and Katherine Joslin to endorse that Wharton's so-called maladjustment, was actually the nourishment that produced work of genius. Wharton took from her life what would help her to write.

Regarding mothers and daughters, many women, including this writer, have experienced sexual silencing from their mothers who inherited the condition from patriarchal society. This is unfortunate, but true. However, many women past and present have overcome this and matured into a healthy, sexual self just the same.

Indeed, not all female critics are quick to place blame on the mother for the same reason(s) just stated. To be sure, Lucretia had her faults, but it is important to remember something here. Edith Wharton is giving her readers this account of her mother. This may indeed be a case of, borrowing a line from Emily Dickinson, "Tell All the Truth but Tell it Slant." It is truth as Wharton wanted her truth to be known.

Susan Goodman makes this point in her article "Edith Wharton's Mothers and Daughters," wherein she cautions readers that it is well to remember when reading Wharton's autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, "Edith Wharton, the autobiographic, is also the biographer of her mother, Lucretia Jones. The autobiographic tells her mother-daughter story the way she has always told it since childhood, and has several variations: the insensitive mother of the sensitive daughter; the indifferent mother of the eager daughter; the prosaic mother of the lyrical daughter." Goodman goes on to say that "Critics such as Cynthia Griffin Wolff and R.W.B. Lewis have substantiated this characterization, but Wharton, the biographer, subtly protests" (Goodman 127). Goodman refers to something Gell Gale Chevigny explained, that "The urge to protect, rescue, and lionize is particularly strong when writing about someone of the same sex . . . because coming to terms with another's life involves coming to terms, at least for a time, with one's own" (Goodman 127). It is suggested that Wharton experienced this urge, and in so doing, "gives her memoir two voices." One voice, "speaks for the child, forever angry and competitive with the person who did the most 'to falsify & misdirect' her life, and the other speaks for the adult, sympathetic with the woman who could never overcome the same cultural difficulties her daughter surmounted" (Goodman 127).

Recent preoccupation with Edith Wharton's relationship with her mother has produced solid scholarship from famous feminist scholars. Case in point is Gloria Erlich's study of Edith Wharton's sexual education, wherein she traces Wharton's "erotic development and her use of writing to explore new possibilities for that development. The process starts with flaws in the mother-daughter relationship that derailed her

emotional development and caused a massive sexual repression" (Erich ix). Later in her book, Erlich would make the claim that "The ardent sexuality that Wharton could not express within marriage erupted with adolescent fury in an adulterous liaison" (Erich 104).

It is accepted that Wharton did not have a nurturing mother. About this there is no debate or doubt. Simply stringing along Cynthia Griffin Wolff's adjectives, Lucretia was "remote, disapproving, impatient, and unloving" (Wolff 12). Dwelling on the mother-daughter relationship, however, is an exercise in futility, more so than this critic and writer has space to suggest. This writer and critic does not feel that the flaws in the mother-daughter relationship somehow derailed Wharton's emotional development and caused a massive sexual repression. This writer feels somewhat differently, that Wharton was able to overcome her sexual shyness and became emotionally stable. Or, as critic E. K. Brown put it, that Wharton was able to "transcend the limitation of her sex . . . she is at ease in a man's world" (Joslin 138). At ease, because she was neither exclusively masculine, nor exclusively feminine. One thinks, moreover, that Wharton ultimately learned to mother herself. Dwelling on Wharton's terrible childhood muddies the water in the pool of her life that cannot be cleaned up. Credit the gene pool that gave Wharton the pure vessel of mind to sail through difficult times. On this, there will be no more to say!

Getting Back to the Garden

"the library calls me back"

(*A Backward Glance*, 64)

Critics have averted their eyes and wandered far from the threshold of Frederic Jones's library. Perhaps this library was where Edith Wharton learned about male writing and dreamed about her female literary ambition. Perhaps this is where Wharton developed her bisexuality of vision. Enter now into the "kingdom of [her] father's library" at Pencraig. A dim-lit library where a luminous mind was taking hold of the world and its people. This library was a Garden of Ed[en]ith, where Wharton came to sow seeds that would bear the fruit of her genius. "This neglected room in a house on West Twenty-third Street, New York, this library of unread books, is the spot where Pussy Jones's [Wharton's childhood nickname] secondary life first pushed up its tiny sprout above the soil in which she was planted" (Kellogg 5). It was a fertile ground for cropping and reaping knowledge, but it was a fallow field of female writers.

But there was a serpent in Eden. Behind the great oak doors of patriarchal literary tradition and authority sat the youthful Edith Wharton, who learned and mused deeply on a language abounding with tall tales of famous men and their deeds. The paternal shelves were handsomely stacked in this gentleman's library, just waiting to be well-thumbed by a young, innocent fe/male reading and discovering male art. All of her first impressions of the writing world, the male point of view, were here obtained. Since literature is a male enterprise, it has always recorded and defined the essence of fe/maleness from the

male point of view. They dipped that male pen into a well of conclusions regarding the female. Thus, through the medium of art, attitudes about women have been shaped. As it was their fashion, the patriarchal structure of literary life clothed the fe/male in a male language. "She is" as he defines her. This mindset of patriarchal authority regarding art and life remained in the attic of Wharton's mind when she wrote *The House of Mirth* (1905).

The "tableaux vivants" scene at the Brys' residence in *The House of Mirth* can only be viewed as a literary masterpiece in plot construction, for not only does it frame the subject/object, Lily Bart, but also the male mindset regarding the essence of femaleness. Wharton places the "tableaux vivants" scene at the fulcrum, dead center, of the novel. This narrative structure is purposeful; Wharton uses it in order to frame the masculine and feminine condition as they relate to each other in society. In this sense Wharton renders a brilliant compositional unity of the visual art and the written word. By staging herself in a flattering pose, Lily Bart becomes a living Reynolds painting. In so doing, she is transformed into art. Framed. Thus, it becomes Wharton's original masterpiece, in that she frames the female the way language has framed her. To freeze Lily is to freeze her out of her sexuality and her individuality.

Selden, "the observer," transforms art into his reality. For Selden, Lily never looked more radiant, nor more vulnerable. Even though Lily had "shown her artistic intelligence in selecting a type so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself," and had the good taste to have "purposely

chosen a picture without distracting accessories of dress or surrounding," only Gerty Farish sees the "real Lily" (141-142).

Thus, the male is also framed for his crime against the female. The "tableaux vivants" scene becomes a remarkable work of art. As Lily's image bleeds through the canvas with intensity, the artist draws attention away and toward the criticism of the observer, rather than criticism of the sitter.

If her father's library was a schoolroom for her intellectual stimulation, it was also Edith's "secret garden," a bed of creation where her innocent buds of fancy germinated into a fiery bloom. Here, in her father's library, Edith Wharton tells her readers in *A Backward Glance*, her mother carefully chose and read books to her. Mother decreed that Edith "should never read a novel without asking her permission" (65). Fearful of the sexual content in novels, her controlling mother deprived Edith of the Victorian novel but freed her to read the Bible and Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. Edith's response to these "words and rhythms of poetry and play" was one of arousal. Mindful not to disturb her parents, she "hugged her treasures to herself in secret." In this library, Edith whiled away the hours, in her own words, with "a secret ecstasy of communion" (Lewis 29).

But, it was in this dim-lit room, that a girl's sexual awakening occurred. Here is where the future literary lioness crouched under her table-lair, reading and discovering from and of literary lions. One can envision the young, innocent Edith, hidden from discovery of "Doyley--Hannah Doyle, the ever-protective Irish nurse" (Lewis 16). To Wharton, the library was vast. Herein her dark eyes read the masculine view of art and life. She was also reading and discovering, wide-eyed and slack-jawed no doubt, about

the firm-flesh-and-blood of people. To an imaginative child, this was the world as her curious eyes read it and came to know it. Seeing a "sea of wonders," she plunged at will. Looking inside, what she saw peering from these books filled the gallery of her mind with pictures of sexual thoughts and deeds. As a young child, she probably had to stand on a stool to reach beyond her grasp those books! Perhaps Wharton's literary dreams came from reading everything she could get her hands on. It was Wharton's "secret retreat, a refuge from the alien adult life" that swirled around her (Kellogg 3). In Wharton's own words she admits, "I kept my adventures with books to myself" and that "there was in me a secret retreat where I wished no one to intrude" (ABG 70).

Therefore, Wharton knew the facts of life. Both in practice (her affair with Morton Fullerton) and in theory. Tellingly, Wharton's sexual awareness is proven and her innocence disproved when reading *The Age of Innocence*, and suddenly May Welland retorts to Newland Archer: "You mustn't think that a girl knows as little as her parents imagine. One hears and one notices--one has one's feelings and ideas" (AI 149). So did Edith Wharton. Therefore, May was no innocent. Wharton was no innocent.

"The Soul Selects Her Own Society
 ----Emily Dickinson #303----"

Many Whartonian biographers and critics have quoted a phrase from Percy Lubbock, that Edith Wharton "liked and repeated the remark, that she was a 'self-made-man'" (Lubbock 11). At first glance, this term conjures up a masculine image of Wharton. Indeed, according to another biographer, R. W. B. Lewis, Edith did have a "strong, almost masculine jawline" (Lewis 10). Wharton's brother Harry, "detecting the streak of virile toughness that lay behind her enjoyment of pretty dresses and of inspecting herself in the mirror, amusedly called her 'John'" (Lewis 26). So, too, "Teddy" following Wharton's brother Harry's habit sometimes called her "John" (Lewis 55). But, Wharton was also called "Lily" as a child. Therefore, these masculine images of Wharton probably took hold of her because of the predominately male company she kept.

Truth told, Wharton was a woman who chose her own company very carefully. Lewis also said that Edith Wharton "was a woman who felt a need not only for friendship, but for something larger: for a community of friends" (Lewis 196). As far as Wharton's attitude toward her friendships, Susan Goodman in the Preface of her book, *Edith Wharton's Inner Circle*, makes the point that Wharton "valued her friendships second only to art" (Goodman ix).

It is true that Wharton "drew more substance from the company of men than of women" (Lewis 57). It is also true that Wharton's friendships were mostly with men. "More than one of her friends have already noted, without surprise, that she preferred the

company of men; and indeed there were some obvious reasons why she should, two of the more so being that she had a very feminine consciousness and a very masculine mind" (Lubbock 54). However, it is false of Lubbock to think that only the masculine mind is porous, resonant, that it is naturally more creative than the female mind.

Wharton's fe/male mind was equal to any task. Insofar as Wharton's femininity in this circle of men is concerned, one could say that "Edith Wharton was the central female, a position that kept her feeling feminine and flirtatiously alive" (Erich 118). One could also say that the group was a refuge and support system for Wharton. The "inner circle" was a way for Wharton to find a connection and to maintain her independence after her divorce.

Indeed, Wharton may have felt more comfortable with men. Tellingly, her autobiography opens with her walking with her father, and her first kiss from a young boy, Daniel. It certainly would not be out of line to suggest that Wharton may also have surrounded herself with predominately males because at the time, writers, artists, and the like, were mostly males. Her friendships were with well-established male artists. The path and plight of the female writer was still not clear. It was uncharted territory. As one critic opined, "By becoming an ally of authority she could have authority" (Raphael 28). Perhaps, then, Wharton's reference to herself as a 'self-made-man,' was a tongue-in-cheek expression to indicate what she and her pen may have needed to appear in order to become a self-made-woman writer.

It is false that Wharton disliked, hated or feared females. This is a view put forth by Janet Malcolm and endorsed by some feminist theorists. As Katherine Joslin said, it

would be "misleading to suggest that Edith Wharton was a feminist, at least in the current understanding of the term" (Joslin 8). Some truth. Wharton was neither in theory nor in practice a feminist. However, her work can be said to "constitute perhaps the most searching--and searing--feminist analysis of the construction of 'femininity'" (Joslin 140). Therefore, the proper view of Wharton is as an ambivalent feminist. Concurring with Amy Kaplan's assessment of Wharton, that she was an "androgynous" writer, and in support refers to one of Wharton's letters: "I conceive my subjects like a man--that is, rather more architectonically & dramatically than most women--then execute them like a woman,' so as to provide 'the small incidental effects that women have always excelled in, the episodic characterization, I mean'" (Joslin 141). Thus, as Amy Kaplan has suggested, Edith Wharton belonged at the 'intersection' of popular literature. . . ." (Joslin 139). Wharton was neither a feminist nor a masculinist, she was androgynous.

It is false to suggest, as some did, that the women that Wharton was emotionally close to were servant women she was dependent upon. One truth to this accusation may be directed toward the friendship Wharton shared with Catherine Gross. Gross was Wharton's "long-time friend and housekeeper" (Lewis & Lewis 18). More truth, there were many women that sustained Wharton in her lifetime. Women like Mary (or "Minnie") Cadwalader Jones, Wharton's hard-pressed sister-in-law, with whom Wharton "had nothing but praise" and because Minnie had "a lot of hard knocks," Wharton financially supported her all her life (Lewis 412). Daisy Chanler, was a close friend whom Edith had known since 1867. Beatrix Farrand, "Minnie's" daughter "Trix," who traveled with her aunt Edith, and to which Wharton would say: "Minnie and Trix made

up to me for my wretched family, and all my thoughts and interests are with them” (Lewis 412). Sara Norton, “the literate and discerning daughter of Charles Eliot Norton, Harvard professor and scholar” (Lewis & Lewis 4); and Elisina Tyler, “indispensable aide-de-camp and friend since the first days of the war” (Lewis 5), to name a few.

The way to reach Edith Wharton’s heart was through her mind. As her biographer Lewis writes, there was one woman in particular, Vernon Lee, who captured Wharton’s attention. Though Vernon Lee was:

slight in stature, she had a long oval face and gleaming, bespectacled gray-green eyes. She dressed in a mannish style with collar and tie, and she was indeed lesbian in her inclinations. Edith, who was probably unaware of this, took to the older woman at once, as she would other women over the years who, like Vernon Lee, combined gifts of mind and imagination with a somewhat unorthodox private character. Vernon Lee was, besides, one of the great talkers of her time. She was voluble, forceful, wide-ranging, and mercilessly clever, and she exuded such a knowledge of historical Italian life that more than once during these first visits Edith Wharton was reduced to humble silence. (Lewis 72)

Adrienne Rich said in her book *On Lies, Secrets, and Silences*, “I have a notion that genius knows itself” (Rich 160). Rich was referring to Emily Dickinson, in her essay “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson.” Like Dickinson, Wharton knew she was exceptional and knew what she needed. A person whose intelligence surpasses that of the people surrounding her will always be forced to seek like-minded people. If she does not, she runs the risk of going mad. Like Dickinson, Wharton was attracted by, and interested in, men whose minds had something to offer her, or whose minds were

akin to hers. This "inner circle," Wharton subscribed to was a group of great genius, lesser geniuses, almost genius, touch of genius. Henry James was the acknowledged genius among the "inner circle."

Like Dickinson, Wharton was equally attracted by and interested in women whose minds had something to offer. However, this does not mean sexually interested in. There is no indication, nor tangible proof of this tendency in Wharton. Rather, Wharton was stirred by the work of women, who like George Eliot, possessed strength of mind.

This male coterie that Wharton belonged to was a group of artists and intellectuals. "It was a small tight circle of literati" (Kellogg 97). It was a group of companionable intelligences, which consisted of (in alphabetical order): Bernard Berenson, Walter Berry, Morton Fullerton, Henry James, Gaillard Lapsley, Percy Lubbock and Howard Sturgis. This "inner circle" or "happy few" as critic Goodman puts it, were the "chosen" ones. These 'happy few' considered themselves selected and selective (Goodman ix). They were a group of sensitive minds. They were linked together by their commonality, that is, they were well-known, but and more importantly, they were like-minded.

"The inner circle came together as adults; in 1908, . . . their average age was forty-three" (Goodman 4). According to Goodman, "Wharton surrounded herself with men like Lapsley, who were generally not sexually interested in her, because they left her core of self undisturbed. As confreres they were safe, the relationship defined on their part and hers" (Goodman 30).

Perhaps Wharton's lure to this group was in the recognition that its members also had a bisexuality of vision. "The inner circle refused to categorize, prescribe, or judge behavior by gender. For them, gender worked in complex, fluid ways" (Goodman 14). The following are some narrow characterizations by Susan Goodman that both shape and limit their self-portraits.

Bernard Berenson "led a life of astonishing successes, which took him from a ghetto in Lithuania to the halls of Harvard" (Goodman 79). Berenson, Wharton and Berry were an affectionate trio. However, Berry was very jealous. Berry "had it fixed in his head that Edith's emotional commitment was exclusively to Berry, and had been for many years" (Lewis 294). Eventually, it was Berenson's jealousy that made him turn against Berry. Out of the same emotion "Berenson helped create the exaggerated image of Edith's long-standing infatuation with Berry" (Lewis 294).

Walter Berry's steady encouragement procured him the role of Wharton's literary counsel. Berry would say to Wharton, "Come, let's see what can be done," and settled down beside her to model the lump into a book." From Berry, Wharton claimed "that she had been taught whatever she knew about the writing of 'clear, concise English'" (Auchincloss 62). "In Edith Wharton's view, he was the wisest, kindest, and essentially the dearest man she had ever known, indispensable encouraging and astute during her literary apprenticeship and her years of illness (which he certainly was), and in later times the one person she could invariably turn to for understanding and counsel" (Lewis 478).

Gaillard Lapsley, was an "astute Rhode Island-born don of medieval history at Cambridge, who would eventually be Edith Wharton's literary executor and the initiator

of the Wharton archive at Yale (Lewis & Lewis 4). He was a sympathetic and partisan listener. Lapsley was one of Wharton's closest and most dependable friends. "Lapsley maintained relationships unmarred by jealousy and competition with all the members of the inner circle." Because Lapsley and Lubbock were very close, "the others often mentioned them together: 'I am lying like a birdcatcher behind the cage,' Sturgis wrote Wharton in 1913, 'baited with two lumps of sugar in the shape of Percy & Gaillard, holding my breath & hardly daring to move'" (Goodman 27).

Percy Lubbock, was a gifted English writer who drank endless cups of tea, had "black moods, experienced unrequited love or---more frequently---needed counsel about his conflicted relationship with Alfred Benson: 'I said to ACB 'I won't show you what I have been writing---you would hate it.' 'No,' he said. 'I don't *hate* your work---but it seems to me like *death*. Fine and lofty perhaps, but the end of everything I enjoy & desire.' Editing Benson's diaries in 1926, Lubbock confided: 'one turn of the screw is also a surprise to me---the reckless horrid way in which he apparently talked about me to people I hardly know---all noted down in the diary with a sort of *glee*---it's hard'" (Goodman 27).

Howard Sturgis was an overt homosexual. When he could put his embroidery needle down, he picked up the pen and did some writing. Most of his time was spent caring for and coddling his cousin, William Haynes Smith (nicknamed "The Babe"), whom Sturgis treated as his child and wife. "Despite a proclivity for high-risk investments on Smith's part, the two lived comfortably together until Sturgis's death."

But Sturgis had no artistic confidence. According to Goodman, "Sturgis mistrusted his own form of artistic intelligence" (Goodman 79).

One can argue with Gloria Erlich's accusation that Wharton's "circle of male friends functioned almost as a composite husband" (Erlich xii). This was a group of "benedicks," confirmed bachelors, overt homosexuals or ambivalent sexuality. Thus, Wharton was not looking for a husband here. She was looking for a different kind of union. It was intellectual companionship Wharton sought. For Wharton, contact of thought was much closer than a kiss (Lewis 211). One might suggest that this "inner circle" of male friends appealed to Wharton because they too were in touch with both sides of their brains, the masculine and the feminine.

Henry James

Edith Wharton was well aware of Henry James and his work. R.W.B. Lewis writes that "Edith wanted nothing more than to meet Mr. James." Apparently both were present at two prior meetings, "on neither of which did James even notice her" (Lewis 124). Wharton just wanted to get the Master's attention long enough to "blurt out [her] admiration for *Daisy Miller* and *The Portrait of a Lady*" (Lewis 125). Failing to make the visual connection with James, however, Wharton resorted to communicating with him by letter to Lamb House in Rye; she sent along as a companion a story she wrote called "The Line of Least Resistance." James replied immediately and, in the fall of 1900, the relationship with this fellow-artist was under way. According to her biographer Lewis, "The Line of Least Resistance" was far from Edith Wharton's best." However, the literary advice that James offered Wharton was the best, that "she should continue to explore in fiction the American world she lived in" (Lewis 125).

About a year and a half later, James took the initiative. This time, James instructed Scribners to send Wharton a copy of his latest work, *The Wings of the Dove*. As a companion to his novel, James sang Wharton's praises regarding her latest work, *The Valley of Decision*. At the end of the letter, James wrote, "Do New York!" From a literary point of view, "It was the most important and the wisest literary advice Edith Wharton ever received" (Lewis 127).

They became very good friends. Wharton referred to James as "the perfect friend" (ABG 364). Though their friendship was young, James was past his prime, in his sixties; Wharton was facing middle-age, entering her forties. James had lost the "dandy"

look of his youth, but he held on to an "unimpaired intellectual vitality" (ABG 365).

With age, he "had expanded to a rolling and voluminous outline and the elegance of dress had given way to the dictates of comfort" (Kellogg 99). In a word, he was pudgy!

However, his stoutly plump figure was full of a profound depth and dedication.

According to Wharton, "he had a devouring imagination" (ABG 368).

Wharton, sometimes impossible, sometimes imposing, would descend upon James at Lamb House, interrupting his sacred routine of writing to "whisk him away on sight-seeing jaunts or lure him to her apartment in Paris for what he described as her 'succulent and corrupting meals' (Auchincloss 78). In her motor-car, as Wharton puts it, they "whirled around in great loops of exploration," to which, the twenty-miles-an-hour average speed in the Panhard (her "chariot of fire" James called it) would often lull James to sleep, only to have its occasional spurt of forty-five miles-an-hour suddenly wake him. (ABG 248). One visualizes Wharton sitting upright and straight-backed in the back seat of the wide-open Panhard, exposed entirely to the elements. Her head held high, her red hair in a scarf, the rest of her clad from head to toe in a cape that picked up dust that was hitch-hiking over miles of open road. One might envision James stuffed in a coat pulled up to his ears, cap pulled down to conceal his furrow-brow, bemoaning the modest meal his delicate digestion struggles to claim and retain. Teddy at the wheel, goggles on his face, at his back comes the squeal from the two literary big wheels. As one critic remarked, "in the beginning, Mrs. Wharton's motorcars may have been quite as potent an element in cementing her and Henry's friendship as their common craft" (Kellogg 101).

Time to nail a canard. Contrary to traditional critical view, Edith Wharton was not the disciple bowing at the altar of the feet of the "Master," Henry James.

This pupil-Master rumor originated from Percy Lubbock's version of Edith Wharton in *The Portrait*, wherein he suggested that Edith seemed to regard Henry as the master of her art (Lubbock 2). One might suggest that Lubbock himself is the worshipping disciple bowing at James's feet. Lubbock becomes the "pale imitator" of Wharton's ghost stories. In *The Portrait*, Lubbock casts Wharton from the first page and thereafter she is ghost-like, merely a shadow that haunts the pages of Lubbock's work like a restless spirit wanting to be seen and heard. The obsessed Lubbock only had words for James.

"Lubbock's portrait of Wharton becomes essentially a tribute to Henry James: 'It was enough, I suppose, that she was herself a novel of his, no doubt in his earlier manner'" (Lubbock 8; Joslin 130). This is clearly a case of the female Wharton, being eclipsed by the usurping male Lubbock.

As a critic, Lubbock would get a failing grade from Wharton. Wharton imparts with her opinion about writing, in her *The Writing of Fiction*. Therein she advises that "the first page of a novel ought to contain the germ of the whole" (51). But Lubbock abandons Wharton on the first page. Thereafter, he embraces James. No wonder Lubbock was Wharton's one-time friend, long-time foe. Ten years before Wharton's death, she and Lubbock had a falling out over his marriage to a woman she detested, Sybil Cutting.

And, there's no hope to shed any positive light on Wharton from Edmund Wilson, who in his 1941 essay "*Justice to Edith Wharton*," takes poetic license not to give poetic

justice to her, but, and rather, calls Wharton's autobiography "one that dwells very little on anything except the figure of Henry James, of whom Mrs. Wharton has left a portrait entertaining but slightly catty and curiously superficial" (Howe 29). Perhaps one should inform Mr. Wilson that his qualifying statement at the beginning of his essay, "This essay is therefore no very complete study," disqualifies him as an expert (Howe 19).

A feminist might argue that Edmund Wilson's view of Wharton as the pale imitator of James, and her work to be the "desperate product of a pressure of maladjustment's," is himself an imitator of a macho-Neanderthal. Obviously this view of Wharton as the pale imitator of James originated, and was fed by, that opposing male faction. In addition, Edmund Wilson also argued that Wharton's work between *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence* was her best for this reason: "It is sometimes true of women writers--less often, I believe, of men--that a manifestation of something like genius may be stimulated by some exceptional emotional strain, but will disappear when the stimulus has passed" (Joslin 135).

Albeit it is true that James noticed in Wharton what he called the "finest characteristic." That is, in a letter to Wharton regarding her latest work, *The Reef*, James sings Wharton high praise. He recognized that Wharton held in her hand the fingermarks of the good "George Eliot--the echo of much reading of that excellent woman, here and there sounding through. But now . . . dearest Edith, you are stronger and finer than all of them put together; you go further and you say mieux. . . ." (Kellogg 98). However, where she most resembles George Eliot, according to E. K. Brown, is in her "ability---she has had from the beginning---to transcend the limitation of her sex" (Howe 96).

Wharton disliked these comparisons with James. It may just be that Wharton was the literary model for James. Grace Kellogg in her book *The Two Lives of Edith Wharton, The Woman and Her Work* (1965), argues, "Edith seems to have been more prone to offer advice to him than he to her" (130). Wharton, disturbed by James's tendency in his later work "to lose all touch with the tangible and the palpable," decided to tell him so. In a conversation, Wharton asked James, "What was your idea in suspending the four principal characters of *The Golden Bowl* in a void? . . . Why have you stripped them of all the human fringes we necessarily trail after us through life?" James apparently shrunk in "painful surprise," but then responded: "My dear--I didn't know I had!" Wharton recalls this situation in her memoirs and writes: "His sensitiveness to criticism had nothing to do with vanity; it was caused by the great artist's deep consciousness of his powers, combined with a bitter, a lifelong disappointment at his lack of popular recognition . . . He could not understand why the success achieved by *Daisy Miller* and *The Portrait of a Lady* should be denied to the great novels of his maturity. . . ." (Kellogg 130).

In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton recalls one of James's visits to the rue de Varenne in Paris, where she, in giving him a lift in her motor car, gave him a literary boost on *The Velvet Glove*. After they had dined at some restaurant, "possibly at Versailles," James and Wharton went motor cruising. In Wharton's words, one soft spring evening. . . knowing his love for motoring at night, I proposed a circuit in the environs, . . . motoring at night high above the moonlit lamplit city and the gleaming curves of the Seine, he

suddenly 'held' his setting, as the painters say, and, though I knew nothing of it till long afterward, *The Velvet Glove* took shape that night" (ABG 309).

Indeed, Carl Van Doren felt that Wharton had "a sharper intelligence than James" (Kellogg 133). When it came to their art, it is a fact not a fiction that Wharton was, financially, more successful than James: "Often he joked about the lack of needed revenue from the work that he knew was his best, as once when Edith remarked that she was planning to buy a new motorcar with the royalties from her latest novel and Henry retorted with his great laugh that with his he might be able to finance a fresh coat of paint for his old wheelbarrow. But it was a joke that covered resentment, bewilderment and a painful sense of injustice" (Kellogg 131).

In actuality, Wharton was trying to distance herself from "James's preoccupation with technique." According to Penelope Vita-Finzi's study of *Edith Wharton and The Art of Fiction* (1990), "Henry James, as his years advanced, and his technical ability became more brilliant, fell increasingly under the spell of formula. From a law almost unconsciously operative it became an inexorable convention" (Vita-Finzi 26).

Wharton's technique was consistently inconsistent, because her mind was never fixed. James gave her the nickname of "The Pendulum Woman" because of her perpetual swings to and fro across the Atlantic, but the nickname could also serve for the movement to and fro of her mind. It was always moving, and one wonders if she ever thought she struck a balance. (Kellogg 5).

All told, there are many windows from which to view the relationship between Henry James and Edith Wharton. Insofar as critics are concerned, Wharton views them

as "left-over dead flies shaken out of a summer hotel window curtain" (Lewis 369).

Insofar as Wharton and James are concerned, Wharton and James complete the sentence:

When Wharton was the teacher, James was the student, when James was the teacher, Wharton was the student. To view their relationship any other way is to close the window on half the sentence. In so doing, either Wharton or James would feel the pain/pane from this window(!). They are both parts of the whole. Susan Goodman's view was that "the two seemed to be parts of one person" (Goodman 57). Paraphrasing from Louis Auchincloss, when Wharton was masculine, James was feminine. When James was masculine, Wharton was very feminine (Auchincloss 82).

As far as Wharton's view, "It was the real marriage of true minds" (ABG 173).

For Wharton, "this marriage of true minds was closer and mystically truer than that of bodies" (Lewis 211).

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